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THE GUILT AND DANGER OF READING INFIDEL, PESTIFEROUS,  
AND IMPURE WORKS.

ACTS XIX. 19. 20.—*Many also of them which used curious arts, brought their books together, and burned them before all men: and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So mightily grew the word of God, and prevailed.*

PROV. XIX. 27.—*Cease, my son, to hear the instruction that causeth to err from the words of knowledge.*

By "the words of knowledge" we are to understand that system of Divine teaching, the cordial reception of which is *true religion*. "The instruction which causeth to err from the words of knowledge" is that which is opposed to the moral welfare of mankind; which tends to poison their principles, and corrupt their practice. Of such instructions the world is full. They surround us like pestilential vapors; and as it is the dictate of prudence to avoid the one, so it is infinitely wise to shun the other. The oldest library of which we have any account was established among the Egyptians by their king Osymandias; and upon the front of it bore this inscription,—"*FOOD FOR THE MIND.*" This is what books were designed to be; and it is only when they bear this character, that they can be used with safety. We naturally become assimilated to objects with which we are intimately conversant. In reading books we often hold closer communion with the spirits of their authors, than when in personal intercourse; and evil communications corrupt good manners as certainly in the one case as in the other. Many, however, who are alive to the dangers of bad company, are insensible to that which flows

from bad books. They devour without suspicion every thing which promises to gratify curiosity, or furnish entertainment; and swallow poison when they should be taking nourishment.

The present is a reading age; the world is flooded with books; and individuals of every class, but particularly the young, need the admonition of the text. "Cease, my son, from the instruction that causeth to err from the words of knowledge." Permit me then, in accordance with the spirit of the text, to direct your attention to

I. The Books which are sources of corruption.

II. The Evils which flow from them.

I. The Books which are sources of corruption.

The first class are those which wage open and direct warfare against religion. The leading popular works of this class were written by men of acute minds, distinguished for their knowledge of the world, and impelled to their task by a fiend-like hatred of the object of their assault. Were there not a congenial spirit in the sinful heart, the sophistries of Hume with all their ingenuity, the wit and sprightliness of Voltaire, the eloquence of Rousseau, and the obscenities and ribaldries of Paine and his vulgar herd of imitators, would scarcely awaken sufficient interest to induce the mind to wander through their pages. But unhappily this affinity exists, and with a power of attraction sufficient to give them a cordial welcome, and secure to them a wide circulation. They are found in almost every community, and are read with avidity by age and youth, but particularly the latter.

As the aim of these writers is to rend asunder every tie which binds man to the throne of God; to destroy all sense of moral obligation! to induce man to renounce his allegiance to the government of Jehovah, despise his authority, trample upon his laws, and be a god to himself; they dispute the Divine existence; or if it be admitted that there is a God, they deny that he takes cognizance of the affairs of men; death is pronounced an eternal sleep; the Bible is treated with contempt and scorn, as an imposition upon the credulity of the world, a fabrication of designing priests, a tissue of absurdity and falsehood; virtue and vice, truth and falsehood, are reprobated as distinctions made to rob men of their natural liberty; Jesus Christ is held up to derision as a deceiver and vile impostor; prophecies are denounced as lies; miracles as cheats; the judgment, heaven, and hell, are scouted and scoffed at, as the dreams of enthusiasm, bugbears to frighten children; human accountability is made a subject of ridicule; and man is taught to lie, defraud, commit adultery or suicide, according to his pleasure.

The great object they have in view is to establish the reign of licentiousness, in which passion and appetite, and lust may walk

abroad without shame, and be indulged without control. In this manner and for such purposes, genius, learning, eloquence and wit, which might have adorned and blessed the world, have prostituted themselves.

It tells but little in favor of the moral condition of our race, when men so employ exalted powers of mind, and interest prompts to the publication of such works, and multitudes are found to read them with avidity and imbibe their principles. But they release from the restraints of the gospel, and vindicate the ways of iniquity; the sinful heart therefore will take pleasure in them.

Let the young be warned against them. They are subtle, yet sophistical, full of bold assertion, misrepresentation, and falsehood; they substitute sneers and ridicule for fact and argument; and though they have been triumphantly refuted a thousand times, still their circulation is encouraged to the ruin of many.

2. Another class of destructive books are the licentious and impure. These, though not written with the same professed design, take the surest method of accomplishing it. For

"Errors in the life, breed errors in the brain,  
And these reciprocally those again."

Some of these are the grossest vehicles of impurity. Others, like the sheet let down before the scrupulous apostle, are full of all manner of beasts, both of the clean and the unclean. And while the dress of the former shares the coarseness and vulgarity of their sentiments, the latter have summoned to their aid all the eloquence of prose and all the attractions of poetry. Their authors with a brow of brass, and a heart that is the sink of pollution, devote themselves to the business of corrupting the imagination, inflaming the passions and exciting lust; and through their instrumentality passions and lusts are stirred up, which subvert the order of society, and waste the happiness of individuals and families, and which, but for the influence of such books, might have slept forever in the bosom.

On their pages genius appears sadly perverted from its proper office, ministering to the corrupt taste of vice and profligacy. It may be regarded as treason against the cause of literature to name in this connection some of the authors now alluded to. Fielding, Smollet, Sterne, Moore, and Byron, are proud names on the literary annals of the world. But shall the savage spirit of the lion and the leopard be concealed from the public mind, and they have privilege to hurt and destroy at pleasure, because of the nobleness of their natures or the beauty of their appearance?

The wide-spread pestilence, beneath whose arm the strong men faint at the tops of the streets, and the mighty sink in helplessness on their beds and in their graves, is far less to be dreaded, than these

poisonous fountains, whose waters cause the soul to stagnate and perish in its own corruptions. They cannot be read in company but at the expense of decency, nor in the closet without opening the heart to every foul spirit. The foundations of society are convulsed and overthrown by them, and man in all his pride and glory degraded beneath the level of the brutes that perish.

3. A third class of pernicious writings are works of imagination and fiction.

In this we include novels, romances, and plays. They exceed in number both of the others, and are generally far less exceptionable in their character. Their avowed object is to enlarge our acquaintance with human nature, and cherish a love of virtue, and a hatred of vice. Did they fulfil the promises of which their authors are lavish, the civilized world would present a very different picture from that which now every where meets the eye. Instead of vice enthroned as a queen, idolized and worshipped as the source of honor, office, influence, and wealth, virtue would be in the ascendant, and reign and triumph among men. But while they profess to make the world wiser and better, the result of their labors is to furnish amusement, and enlarge and perpetuate the empire of sin. Truth and justice demand that exceptions should be made from this general sentence of denunciation, particularly in favor of some works of this class, which are of modern date. Their materials are drawn from the living world, and though worked up by fancy, to impart to them the interest of a tale, they fulfil to some extent the office of history, and inculcate important lessons of truth. But while these and some other peculiarities exempt them from unqualified condemnation, and entitle them to a preference among works of this class, still, like the miserable fictions which preceded them, they often "cause to err from the words of knowledge."

Could nothing more be said of these works but that they merely furnish amusement, we should scarcely have given them a notice from the pulpit. But while as a body they are useless for any higher purpose, they have a bearing upon the moral and religious interests of the community, which demands the note of warning. Combining in themselves eloquence, humor, wit, all the powers of language and all the graces of style, they possess an attractiveness scarcely to be resisted. Hence they are read with avidity, at an age when their influence is most to be deprecated. To these sources may be traced many errors both in principle and practice which war against the soul.

Were these various classes of pernicious books brought together into one vast pile, and, like those of the converts at Ephesus, "burned before all men," the world would experience no real loss, but infinite

gain. The first and second classes breathe the unmingled atmosphere of pollution and death. And the last, with few exceptions, tend to corrupt the youthful heart and divert it from the proper objects of pursuit, and especially from the great interests of eternity.

II. The manner in which this is done, or the evil tendency of such works, is the second point of consideration.

1. They waste precious time. "What is our life? It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away!" This is its character viewed in its greatest extent, from the cradle to three score years and ten, the allotted period of human life. Subtract from this period the hours devoted to refreshment and rest, the time spent in business, employed in the discharge of ordinary domestic duties, or given to needful exercise, and what remains? A third part of human life is passed in the unconsciousness of sleep. Add to this what is appropriated to eating and drinking, or to worldly engagements, and the remainder dwindles to a span.

But man is not born to a mere worldly existence. His intellectual and moral powers point him out the heir of a higher and nobler destiny; a destiny beyond the grave, in the presence of God, in the company of angels, among the spirits of the just made perfect. While wedded to his sinfulness this inheritance is in forfeiture. But through the reign of grace, it is still held forth to his acceptance, and he is enjoined and urged, by timely repentance—by striving against and forsaking every evil way, appropriating Jesus Christ in his merits and offices, living in obedience to the Divine commands, cultivating holiness, and being active in every good work—to press forward to the heavenly possession.

Failing in the attainment of this, the soul sinks under accumulated guilt, into everlasting wo! Such is the character of human existence. Threatened on one side with overwhelming ruin, wooed on the other by immortal bliss. To flee the one and lay hold on the other, are the great purposes for which life is continued; and were every moment of it appropriated to the grand object, it would not be too much. But a great proportion is necessarily diverted, and a fragment only can be made available. Reading, prayer, self communion, active benevolence, all the means employed and efforts made, are to a great extent circumscribed within the narrow limits of this unappropriated period. Whether this period be longer or shorter than has been intimated, what is it in comparison with the work to be performed?

Shall a part even of this be spent in vain and unprofitable reading? Shall we give to mere amusement, the precious and invaluable hours on which hang the immortal interests of immortal man? Is it not a lavish expenditure and sinful waste of an invaluable gift?



Where such reading is indulged, until it grows into a habit, we can scarcely calculate the waste of time. There is a fascination in well written works of fiction, (and to these I now allude,) which gives them a magic power over the soul, by means of which they insensibly steal away months and years. If the time thus spent makes a serious inroad upon life, contemplated as a whole, how much more serious the inroad made upon the golden period of youth! With you, my young friends, it is emphatically a wasting of the seed time on which hang the hopes of the future harvest. And if you, under such circumstances, perish in your sins, how utterly without excuse will you be, in the presence of the great Judge! He has admonished you with frequency and tenderness,—“Redeem the time.” “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.” “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” But, in direct contempt of all, you throw away the hours big with the promise of the year, in pursuit of worthless gratification. Dare you, in this manner, pervert the talents entrusted to your charge? Dare you so challenge the character of the wasteful steward, before the bar of God, and bring upon yourself the fearful sentence,—“Cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness?” Such is your presumption when you spend time in unprofitable reading.

Add to what has been said, the further consideration that these works, while they amuse, corrupt the mind; those of the first classes infusing a most deadly poison; those of the last, a poison less virulent and active, but scarcely less fatal; and the waste of time grows in criminality a thousand fold. The period granted, in mercy, to heal the disorders of the soul, you devote to spreading and deepening the infection; and thus work death with what was intended to be the means of endless life!

2. They create a disrelish for serious reading. “Search the *Scriptures*, for in them ye think ye have eternal life, and they are they which testify of me.” In such language the great Prophet of mankind indicates one of the chief sources of religious instruction and influence. A preached gospel is the grand means which God has instituted for the conversion and training of the soul. But next to this, and inferior only to it in importance, is the reading of the *Scriptures* and other religious works. Faith and all those associate virtues which form the christian character, and qualify the soul for the service and enjoyment of God, originate in a knowledge of that truth which is embodied in the word of God, and can only be acquired through the medium of hearing and reading.

Whatever tends to unfit the mind for employing this means must prejudice the best interests of man. Will any dispute that this is the effect of the works under consideration? Infidelity wars against

truth in all its forms, and uses its utmost efforts to render it odious and despicable,—that the mind may keep itself in utter estrangement from it. Sobriety and seriousness are laughed to scorn on every page it issues from the press. The very terms are hateful to it, as a representation of habits which frown upon its principles and reprove its practices. So far as infidelity extends, therefore, Revelation will be regarded with aversion and disgust. The heart will recoil from it as a system of falsehood, a usurper of its rights, and an enemy to its enjoyments.

A similar influence is exerted by works of the second class. Filling the imagination with images of impurity, inflaming lust, and cherishing a spirit of licentiousness, they render truth odious to the soul, and it turns from it with loathing and abhorrence. "What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness, or what communion hath light with darkness?"

Does a better spirit emanate from the pen of fiction? Does the novel, the romance, the tragedy, the comedy, cherish a disposition favorable to that truth which enlightens, purifies, and quickens the soul? On the contrary do we not find that they who habituate themselves to reading works of this character, rarely seek after those of a higher class?—that books which inform and strengthen the mind, and more especially those which quicken the conscience and purify the heart, are regarded with prejudice, or aversion?

Such works are designed for instruction and improvement, and cannot therefore minister to the appetite and taste of those who are looking for mere amusement. The Bible and kindred works present to the lovers of fiction no startling novelties, no spirit stirring incidents, no brilliant wit, no flowing humor, to give fascination to their pages, and lead the mind captive at will. They may be resorted to by them for something to ease a troubled conscience, or fortify the mind against the influence of truth, but not from any feeling of interest, or desire of improvement. They are equally revolting to minds trained and disciplined in the school of fancy, because of the fixedness of thought and closeness of attention necessary to make them tributary to their improvement. They love to move with rail road speed, and gather their harvest of enjoyment without an effort.

Is it not so, my young friends? I appeal to your own experience, to know whether the pages of a novel give a relish for the Scriptures? Whether as your interest grows in works of fiction you do not feel an increasing prejudice against all serious reading?

3. They are unfavorable to the interests of morality. To attempt to argue this with respect to the writings of infidelity would be worse than a waste of time; for it would seem to admit that there was

some shadow of ground for the claim they arrogantly press, that they are the friends of morality. Friends of morality! Their influence upon morality is like that of Samson upon the harvests of the Philistines when he sent forth his foxes with their fire brands.

A mere glance of thought must satisfy every mind that the effect of works of licentiousness is the same. While the former aim to corrupt the streams by poisoning the fountain, the latter exert their influence immediately upon the streams.

The tendency of works of fiction to produce such results is not so easily perceived, nor so readily admitted. Their authors and advocates challenge public patronage as the friends of morality and the enemies of vice; and would have themselves constituted the chief nurses and guardians of the youthful mind. And yet the name of God is rarely introduced upon their pages, unless to frame an oath, or fill an exclamation; the Scriptures are brought forward only to point a witticism; public sentiment is recognized as the test of propriety of conduct; passion is constituted the moving power of the soul; and the approbation of conscience or the applause of the world the ultimate ends to be attained. Look at the heroes or heroines of fancy, over whom you bend with admiration and rapture; and when stripped of the attractions thrown around them by their name, their rank, their circumstances, their destiny, what are they but creatures of selfishness, slaves of passion, votaries of pleasure, proud, imperious, vain, and resentful, idolizing the world in some or other of its forms, and anxious to advance their interests, and gain a reputation among men, but thoughtless of God, and of Jesus Christ, and reckless of eternity? If they have a fair character, are alive with sensibility, exhibit patience in suffering and liberality in action, it is to gratify themselves, and secure the esteem of the world. Are these the qualities which fit men to be uniformly trusted in the various departments and relations of life? Will selfishness, the code of honor, or worldly applause, form the consistent, stable character, who will adorn the domestic and social circle, and be the upright citizen and the devoted patriot?

True morality has its spring in God, recognizes his word as the standard of conduct, and seeks to recommend itself to the Divine approbation. Let these things combine, and they form a character to act with integrity in every department. Nothing less than this, nothing that is of mere earthly origin, can form such a character. Nothing less than this can triumph over the depravity of the heart, and elevate the soul above the reach of worldly corruption. Without this, our morality is mere counterfeit coin, imposing perhaps in the eye of the world, but in the view of God, reprobate.

Nor does it improve the moral influence of these works, that vice



is exhibited as tending to poverty, disgrace, and, ruin; and virtue as leading to honor and reward. The mind soon discovers that this picture of fancy is often the reverse of fact, and becomes insensible to its power. But did it exhibit truth, it would fail to accomplish its intended purpose. Mere temporal sanctions, (and they give them no other character,) however great, struggle in vain against the dominion of sin. Hell must move itself, with its eternal horrors, and heaven unbosom its everlasting joys, ere vice becomes loathsome, and virtue triumphs in the soul. A stranger to these motives, the pen of fiction wields no power sufficient to control the selfish spirit, and dispose it to act with uniform integrity.

If any youth, who hears me, would stand before the world, "an honest man, the noblest work of God," he must draw on higher and purer sources than works of fiction, and graduate in a better school of morals than that to which the novelist or the tragedian invites him.

4. Such writings war against the spiritual interests of the soul. Infidelity and libertinism hate religion with a perfect hatred, and infuse their venom into every page they write. The inscription on their banner is, War, eternal war against the Christian's God; and the soul that imbibes their sentiments, receives the baptism of hell.

A somewhat better spirit lives in the pages of fiction, and an opposite purpose is avowed by their authors. But do they really labor in a better cause? Their influence, however slow and imperceptible in its operation, has still the same tendency, and is more to be feared and deprecated, because unsuspected and more widely diffused. Multitudes who turn away with loathing and abhorrence from the former, read the latter with avidity and delight.

Their general popularity furnishes the strongest presumptive evidence of their unfavorableness to the religious interests of mankind. This world must undergo an entire change, ere works which advocate the rights of God, and the immortal interests of man, find so general a welcome.

But examine the works themselves. Is there any thing on the pages of the novel, or the play, to inspire a reverence for God, or remind you of his providential rule? Does any among their varied personages appear, to admonish you of the native corruption of your heart, of the evil of sin, of the terrors of the Lord? Does any finger point to Him "who died, the just for the unjust?" Does any voice cry, "flee from the wrath to come?" Were these the strains they uttered, instead of being resorted to for amusement, they would be thrown aside in disgust.

But no! with the novelist and his associates, man is a creature of infirmity, rather than of sinfulness; his vices are offences to be

overlooked, instead of crimes to be punished. In their view, God reigns, (if he reigns at all,) to exercise mercy, not to execute judgment; future rewards are the earnings of merit, not the bestowment of grace; and punishments are warded off by reformation, not by atoning blood.

Where such sentiments are instilled into the mind continually, what is to be expected but that conscience should be at ease, and the soul repose in proud security on its own merits? The gospel comes with its denunciations and warnings, to bring to penitence and make a Saviour welcome; but they are resisted with the plea of frailty, or on the ground of merit. What can they fear, whose offences are without guilt, and whose virtues commend to approbation! Why should they sorrow in penitence, who are full of worth, or trust in a Saviour, when they feel able to justify themselves?

Such is the pernicious influence emanating from these sources. Through it the soul is entrenched in error, conscience is hushed by false pleas, a spirit of self-vindication and self-righteousness is cherished, the provisions of grace are rejected as superfluous, and Jesus Christ is superseded by the religion of nature. Men live in impenitence, in unbelief, in prayerlessness, in the love of the world, in sin, in sensuality; and yet are confident in the hope of heaven.

Where such is the training of the mind, no wonder God appeals, and the Spirit strives, and Jesus Christ entreats, and the gospel invites, without effect. Every avenue to the conscience and heart is closed up, and how shall grace find entrance? To what extent this influence operates in neutralizing the efficacy of public ordinances among ourselves, can be known only to him who is acquainted with all our ways. No doubt its power is felt to an extent that is little imagined. It not only repels truth from the soul, but it is a direct hindrance to the pursuit of salvation. It combines with other influences to impress upon the soul the fatal lesson, that it is "rich, and increased in goods, and has need of nothing." And while it continues, and is attended with such results, that which should be a garden of the Lord, will remain a barren waste.

Such, then, are the prominent evils consequent upon the reading of improper books. Evils which affect, immediately or indirectly, the salvation of the soul. It was in this light chiefly that I wished to consider the practice. In this view it comes within the province of the pulpit.

Is it not amply demonstrated that the books adverted to, breathe an atmosphere destructive to the soul? Do they not steal away those precious hours which bear salvation on their wings, and cause the soul to cease from the instruction which is good, and corrupt its morals, and war against its spiritual and eternal interests? And shall

we withhold the admonition, "Enter not into their path, go not in the way of them, avoid them, pass not by them, turn from them, and pass away?" Evil books, like evil companions, possess the magic power of assimilating to themselves all who are familiarly conversant with them. So that with respect to them, as well as the other, it may be said, "tell me what company you keep, and I will tell you what you are."

How cautious then ought you to be in the selection of books, both for yourselves and others; and how scrupulously to avoid the reading of such as have been here adverted to. Look at the native character of man, "conceived in sin, and brought forth in iniquity," "prone to evil as the sparks to fly upward." How difficult is it to effect in him any moral renovation! Variety of means adapted to this purpose by infinite wisdom and unbounded grace are in continued operation; but with all their power how little do they accomplish! Will you increase the difficulty, by cherishing influences of an opposite tendency, which will blind the mind, sear the conscience, harden the heart, and render change still more difficult? If you in this manner resist the efforts of grace, and waste the season of merciful visitation, what can you anticipate but to be given up of God to hardness of heart and to blindness of mind?

You, my young friends, are particularly exposed to danger from these sources. While a natural curiosity and propensity to skepticism interests you in the first class of works, and the workings of passion give you a relish for the second, fashion and the love of amusement incline you to the third. And never was the danger greater than at the present day. Infidelity, licentiousness and fancy are all in motion. The press teems with books of every character, and particularly of the latter class; and every art is employed to give them circulation. The typographer, the engraver, and binder, concentrate their powers to render them attractive. Their prices are reduced to a trifle, and the temptation to possess, and of course to read, becomes almost irresistible.

Give heed, then, beloved youth, to this voice of warning. You would not expose your bodies to the pestilence or the hurricane; and will you suffer a moral tempest to sweep over the soul? Rather turn away from that which will corrupt and destroy, and diligently improve the means with which you are favored, and you may fortify yourselves against present evil, and reap the harvest of eternal good. While "Wisdom cries, and understanding puts forth her voice, why will ye spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which satisfieth not? Eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness." Every end to be gained from such works, can be gained in a far higher degree, and

with comparative safety, from books of a different character. If you would gratify curiosity, find rational amusement, and combine profit with pleasure, read history, biography, works of science, and polite literature. They will improve the mind without causing it to err. But evil books are like the forbidden fruit. You taste of them at the hazard of your eternal well being.

While, then, we warn both young and old against that which infuses poison, we would earnestly recommend those works which purify and save the soul. Above all, search the Scriptures. They are "the wisdom and the power of God to salvation, to every one that believeth." These and kindred writings are proper food for the immortal mind—causing it, under the Divine blessing, to grow up into everlasting life; whilst the direct tendency of those upon which we have animadverted, is to corrupt, to dissipate, and destroy.

Our subject furnishes a solemn rebuke to those who, for paltry gain, employ themselves in writing, printing, or selling infidel, impure, or fictitious works—works which they know, or ought to know, are adapted to waste the time, pervert the taste, corrupt the morals, and ruin the souls of men. Could the spirits of lost millions come up from their abodes of woe, would they not say to such, with affecting emphasis,—You, and such as you, have been the instruments of our eternal undoing!—You furnish the fatal poison which "causeth to err from the words of knowledge!"

Our subject, also, solemnly urges upon parents and instructors of youth, the duty of seeing that they are amply supplied with proper "food for the mind," and never indulged with such as tends to dissipate, corrupt, and destroy. Let them forthwith examine their library, and if need be, follow the noble example of those who, for conscience's sake and the gospel's, at once sacrificed books to the value of "fifty thousand pieces of silver." What is such a sacrifice compared with the ruin of one immortal mind?

It is time that the virtuous, and patriotic, and Christian part of the community be aroused on this subject. And on those especially who have influence and wealth, devolves the responsibility of seeing that all our youth are abundantly supplied with useful and interesting books; so that they may have no occasion or desire for such as insidiously work corruption and everlasting death.

